



Life & Style / Travel

Florida juke joint a living time capsule of blues history

 PHOTO GALLERY

From the music and dancing to the fried food and history, the BBC is worth seeking out even though it's hard to find.

By **Nancy Moreland**

Chicago Tribune

FEBRUARY 22, 2019, 8:36 AM | TALLAHASSEE, FLA.

For a bluesman, Lil' Ed Williams looks mighty cheerful. His silver fez and million-watt smile sparkle in the neon aura of the [Bradfordville Blues Club](#), a rural outpost of musical history about 12 miles northeast of downtown Tallahassee.

When a patron shouts, "It's a lot warmer here than Chicago!" the slide guitar king and lead singer for [The Blues Imperials](#) banters back, "You got that right, brother!"

Even with his hometown in a polar vortex death grip, it's not the Southern climate warming the singer's heart on this January night; it's the venue — a cinder-block juke joint at the end of a dark, rutted lane.

“When you drive up that lane, you turn the clock back 50 years,” says club owner Gary Anton. [One of two Florida sites](#) on the [Mississippi Blues Trail](#), the “BBC” rocks the woods with soulful sounds every weekend. The 1960s-era road house isn't easy to find, but for musicians of a certain ilk, it's a holy grail.

“You only find clubs like Bradfordville here and there,” Williams says. “I love that club and hope it always stays that way.”

The band joins a legendary lineup of musicians whose soul-baring ballads have pierced the country quiet.

“Everyone from [B.B. King](#) to Ray Charles came out here to play with local bands when Tallahassee's clubs closed at 2 a.m.,” Anton says. Like other stops on the so-called [Chitlin' Circuit](#), the BBC was a safe venue for African-American musicians during segregation.

Tonight, after 90 minutes of musical alchemy, the band takes a break. The audience disperses into the damp chill, heading straight for a bonfire and Miss Ernestine's fish shack. Presiding over her fry pot, the queen of catfish coaxes one fillet at a time to succulent perfection. So perfect, you hesitate to relinquish its sweet warmth to a brisk sip of beer.

Finally, a single, searing note from Lil' Ed's guitar beckons patrons onto the dance floor. Drifting from the fire, a few gaze skyward into a mantle of Milky Way. Suspended in this tiny universe, they join all those who felt the spirit of this place enter them, who reveled in a joyful juke joint at the end of a dark country road.

Nancy Moreland is a freelancer.